

# **2020 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK)**

Office of International Religious Freedom

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief, with the stipulation that “religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order.” In July, the UN Secretary-General reported to the UN General Assembly that the country “continues to severely restrict the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of association and peaceful assembly.” Multiple sources indicated the situation had not changed since the 2014 *Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the DPRK* was published. The COI found an almost complete denial by the government of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In many instances, the COI determined that there were violations of human rights committed by the government that constituted crimes against humanity. The government reportedly continued to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals engaged in almost any religious activities. The country’s inaccessibility and lack of timely information continued to limit the availability of details related to individual cases of abuse. It also made it difficult to estimate the number of religious groups in the country and their membership. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Open Doors USA (ODUSA) estimated that at year’s end, 50,000 to 70,000 citizens were in prison for being Christian. In May, the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) estimated 200,000 individuals were being held in prison camps, many for being Christian. The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), a South Korea-based NGO, citing defectors who arrived in South Korea from 2007 until December 2019 and other sources, reported 1,411 cases of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief by DPRK authorities, including 126 killings and 94 disappearances. In October, the United Kingdom-based NGO Korea Future Initiative (KFI) released a report based on 117 interviews with defectors who were survivors, witnesses, or perpetrators of religious freedom violations from 1990 to 2019. Investigators identified 273 victims punished for engaging in religious practice or having contact with religious persons, attending places of worship, or sharing religious beliefs. The KFI report said they were subjected to arrest, detention, prolonged interrogations, punishment of family members, torture or sustained

physical abuse, sexual violence, forced abortion, execution, and public trials. For the 19th consecutive year, ODUSA ranked the country number one on its annual World Watch List report of countries where Christians experienced “extreme persecution.” NGOs and defectors said the government often applied a policy of arresting or otherwise punishing family members of Christians. According to ODUSA, “If North Korean Christians are discovered, they [are] deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot.” In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government on April 23 reportedly extended national emergency quarantine measures until the end of the year and ordered the public to refrain from attending large gatherings, including weddings, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies, and observance of ancestral rites. In October, the UN special rapporteur stated the decreased contact with the outside world during the COVID-19 pandemic could exacerbate entrenched human rights violations. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures, including imprisonment, against the practice of shamanism and “superstitious” activities. In September 2019, an NGO posted on social media a government video depicting Christians as “religious fanatics” and “spies” and calling converts “worthless people.” According to *Radio Free Asia* (RFA), authorities launched crackdowns on Falun Gong practitioners in 2019. According to NGOs, the government used religious organizations and facilities for external propaganda and political purposes. In June, the government demolished the inter-Korean liaison office after defector groups in South Korea sent materials over the border that included Bibles and other Christian materials.

The government encouraged all citizens to report anyone engaged in religious activity or in possession of religious material. There were reports of private Christian religious activity in the country, although the existence of underground churches and the scope of underground religious networks remained difficult to quantify. Defector accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from family members, neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to fear of being branded as disloyal and concerns their activities would be reported to authorities. Some defector and NGO reports confirmed unapproved religious materials were available clandestinely. According to one source, the practice of consulting fortune tellers was widespread.

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK. The United States cosponsored a resolution adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly in December that condemned the country’s “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross

violations of human rights” and expressed very serious concern about abuses including imposition of the death penalty for religious reasons and restrictions on the freedoms of conscience, religion, or belief. The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country. In a speech delivered at the Vatican in September, the Secretary of State urged Christian leaders to support religious freedom for Christians in the DPRK.

Since 2001, the DPRK has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 2, 2020, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions to which North Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 25.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The North Korean government last reported religious demographics in 2002, and estimates of the number of total adherents of different religious groups vary. In 2002, the DPRK reported to the UN Human Rights Committee there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, 800 Catholics, and 15,000 practitioners of Chondoism, a modern religious movement based on a 19th century Korean neo-Confucian movement. South Korean and other foreign religious groups estimate the number of religious practitioners is considerably higher than reported by authorities. According to the Religious Characteristics of States Dataset Project, in 2015 the population was 70.9 percent atheist, 11 percent Buddhist, 1.7 percent followers of other religions, and 16.5 percent unknown. UN estimates place the Christian population at between 200,000 and 400,000. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates there are 100,000 Christians, and ODUSA estimates the country has 400,000 Christians. In its 2020 World Christian Database, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity reported 58 percent of the population is agnostic; 15 percent atheist; 13 percent “new religionists” (believers in syncretic religions); 12 percent “ethnoreligionists” (believers in folk religions); and 1.5 percent Buddhists. Christians, Muslims, and Chinese folk religionists make up less than 0.5 percent of the population collectively. The NKDB reported that

among defectors practicing a religion, the majority were Protestant with a smaller number of Catholics, Buddhists, and others. The COI report stated, based on the government's own figures, the proportion of religious adherents among the population dropped from close to 24 percent in 1950 to 0.016 percent in 2002. Consulting shamans and fortune tellers and engaging in shamanistic rituals is reportedly widespread but difficult to quantify. The NKDB reported that five priests from the Russian Orthodox Church are in Pyongyang.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

The constitution states that citizens have freedom of religious belief. This right is granted through the approval of the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies. It further states, "Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the state and social order."

According to a 2014 official government document, "Freedom of religion is allowed and provided by the State law within the limit necessary for securing social order, health, social security, morality and other human rights."

The country's criminal code punishes a "person who, without authorization, imports, makes, distributes, or illegally keeps drawings, photographs, books, video recordings, or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal, or foul contents." The criminal code also bans engagement in "superstitious activities in exchange for money or goods." According to local sources, this prohibition includes fortune telling. The NGO Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) reported that under these two provisions, ownership of religious materials brought in from abroad is illegal and punishable by imprisonment and other forms of severe punishment, including execution.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

There were reports the government continued to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals engaged in almost any religious activities. The country's inaccessibility and lack of timely information continued to make individual arrests and punishments difficult to verify. The July 30 UN Secretary-General's report *Situation of the human rights situation in the DPRK* stated the DPRK "continues to severely restrict the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of association and peaceful assembly... During the reporting period [September 2019 to July 2020], there was no evidence of any improvement with respect to the fulfilment of these fundamental rights and freedoms." The report stated that the government "maintains a monopoly over information and retains total control of organized social life." Multiple sources indicated the situation in the country had not changed since publication of the 2014 COI final report, which concluded there was an almost complete denial by the government of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as well as the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information, and association. It further concluded that in many instances, the violations of human rights committed by the government constituted crimes against humanity, and it recommended the United Nations ensure those most responsible for the crimes against humanity were held accountable.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government on April 23 reportedly extended national emergency quarantine measures until the end of the year and ordered the public to refrain from attending large gatherings, including weddings, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies, and observance of ancestral rites. The October 14 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the *Situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* stated, "The surveillance and control over the population continue in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the decreased contact with the outside world during the COVID-19 pandemic could exacerbate entrenched human rights violations, with more freedoms being restricted, discrimination worsening, and treatment in detention, including in political prison camps aggravating."

In October, KFI released a report entitled *Persecuting Faith: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea, Volume I*. The report was based on 117 interviews with defectors who were survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators of religious freedom violations from 1990 to 2019. Investigators identified 273 victims of religious freedom violations. Of these, 215 adhered to Christianity, 56 adhered to shamanism, and two to other beliefs. The victims ranged in age from

three to older than 80 years old. Women and girls accounted for nearly 60 percent of documented victims. According to the report, the government charged individuals with engaging in religious practice, conducting religious activities in China, possessing religious items, having contact with religious persons, attending places of worship, and sharing religious beliefs. In some cases, the government charged a single victim with multiple offenses. Individuals were subject to arrest, detention, prolonged interrogations, refolement, punishment of family members, torture or sustained physical abuse, sexual violence, execution, and public trials and “resident exposure meetings.” According to the report, “In many cases, a single victim experienced multiple violations.”

In December 2019, ODUSA published a report entitled *North Korea: Country Dossier*. The report identified Communist doctrine and the cult of personality surrounding leader Kim Jong Un as the main drivers of religious persecution. According to the report, Christians were regarded as enemies of the Workers Party of Korea’s ideology.

The NKDB, relying on reports from defectors and other sources, aggregated 1,411 specific cases of abuses of the right to freedom of religion or belief by authorities within the country from 2007 to December 2019. Charges included propagation of religion, possession of religious materials, religious activity, and contact with religious practitioners. Of the 1,411 cases, authorities reportedly killed 126 individuals (8.9 percent), disappeared 94 (6.7 percent), physically injured 79 (5.6 percent), deported or forcibly relocated 53 (3.8 percent), detained 826 (58.5 percent), restricted movement of 147 (10.4 percent), and persecuted 86 (7.9 percent) using other methods of punishment.

The NGO NK Watch estimated that 135,000 political prisoners continued to be held in four political prison camps between September 2019 and July 2020. According to the South Korean government-affiliated Korea Institute for National Unification’s (KINU) 2019 white paper on human rights, the government operated five political prison camps. ODUSA estimated that as of year’s end, 50,000 to 70,000 citizens were in prison for being Christian. In May, CSW estimated 200,000 individuals were being held in prison camps, many for being Christian. CSW and ODUSA said the government maintained a policy of arresting or otherwise punishing relatives of Christians, meaning they could be detained regardless of their beliefs. According to one defector, an entire family was arrested when an informant revealed the family had a Bible.

In its annual *World Watch List* report, ODUSA for the 19th year in a row ranked the country number one on its watch list of countries where the government persecutes Christians. The NGO stated in its dossier, “If North Korean Christians are discovered, they are deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot.” ODUSA stated arrests and abductions of foreign missionaries and punishments for Christians increased. “Christians do not have the slightest space in society; meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible and if some dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy.” The ODUSA dossier stated increased diplomatic activity starting with and following the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in South Korea in February 2018 did not improve religious freedom for Christians in the country. According to the dossier, police raids aimed at identifying and punishing citizens with “deviating thoughts,” including Christians, reportedly increased.

Religious organizations and human rights groups outside the country continued to report that members of underground churches were arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed because of their religious beliefs. One defector told the NKDB in 2018 that a Christian woman was beaten while in custody, denied water, and died of dehydration. Another defector told NKDB in 2017 that in 2011, a Christian woman became so ill in detention she could not feed herself, and when she asked a guard a question, he beat her to death with a ladle.

According to KFI, Christians reported experiencing various forms of torture, “including: being forced to hang on steel bars while being beaten with a wooden club; being hung by their legs; having their body tightly bound with sticks; being forced to perform “squat-jumps” and to sit and stand hundreds or thousands of times each day; having a liquid made with red pepper powder forcibly poured into their nostrils; being forced to kneel with a wooden bar inserted between their knee hollows; strangulation; being forced to witness the execution or torture of other prisoners; starvation; being forced to ingest polluted food; being forced into solitary confinement; being deprived of sleep; and being forced to remain seated and still for up to and beyond 12 hours a day.” The report also documented incidents of torture and physical assault inflicted on persons adhering to shamanism. One victim who had been imprisoned for three years for practicing shamanism sustained permanent damage to the eyes because of repeated physical assaults.

According to KFI, authorities subjected pregnant adherents to forced abortions in detention or killed their infants shortly after birth by smothering them.

KFI also reported that officials repeatedly warned citizens in lectures and “people’s unit meetings” to not read Bibles and to report anyone who owned a Bible. The report documented multiple instances in which authorities found an individual in possession of a Bible and sent the person and other household members to prison. In one case, a Korean Workers’ Party member was arrested for possessing a Bible and executed at Hyesan airfield in front of 3,000 residents. Another respondent told investigators that a relative was arrested for possessing a cross and a Bible after the relative’s partner reported the individual to authorities.

In September 2019, the Christian advocacy group Voice of the Martyrs USA (VOM) posted to YouTube what it described as a “government training video.” In the video, the narrator tells the story of a Christian named Cha Deoksun from Sariwon City who crossed the border illegally into China, where she converted to Christianity. The narrator said the pastors of the church were disguised members of the South Korean secret service and converts were “spies.” Upon returning to North Korea, Cha traveled around the country preaching and organizing an underground church. The narrator described Cha as a “religious fanatic” and “good-for-nothing.” According to the video, she converted her family and other “worthless people.” At some point, “one of our conscientious citizens” reported Cha to authorities and she was arrested. VOM stated, “It is unclear how Deoksun died, but it is possible that she was executed.”

According to KFI, authorities arrested and executed individuals for possessing and sharing religious items such as Bibles. In one case, a victim who brought Bibles into the country was arrested and executed by firing squad close to Samjiyon Hospital, Ryanggang Province, in front of approximately 300 witnesses. In another case, a victim who had been in contact with religious persons was detained and interrogated in North Hamgyong Province. During her detention, an officer shouted at her, “Hey, you [expletive]. Does God know that you are in here?” The officer ordered the woman to crawl backwards out of her cell on hands and knees and beat her with a wooden club.

According to the NKDB, in 2016, there were forced disappearances of persons found to be practicing religion within detention facilities.

International NGOs and North Korean defectors continued to report that any religious activities conducted outside of those that were state-sanctioned, including praying, singing hymns, and



reading the Bible, could lead to severe punishment, including imprisonment in political prison camps. According KINU's 2019 white paper on human rights, authorities punished both "superstitious activities" – including fortune telling – and religious activities, but the latter more severely. In general, punishment was very strict when citizens or defectors had studied or possessed a Bible or were involved with Christian missionaries; authorities frequently punished those involved in superstitious activity with forced labor, which reportedly could be avoided by bribery.

KFI documented cases in which family members of persons who had been charged with crimes associated with religion were subsequently targeted. In certain incidents, this led to the arrests of children as young as three. In other incidents, entire families were arrested. Investigators also documented incidents in which the spouses of persons sentenced for religious crimes were forced to divorce victims.

According to RFA, authorities launched crackdowns on Falun Gong practitioners in 2019.

The government reportedly detained foreigners who it said were engaged in religious activity within the country's borders. There was no further information on Kim Jung-wook, detained in October 2013; Kim Guk-gi, detained in October 2014; or Choi Chun-gil, detained in December 2014 – three South Korean missionaries detained in the country and sentenced to life in prison for "spying and scheming." In December 2018, *The Korea Times* reported the South Korean government tried to negotiate their release.

During the year, VOM undertook a letter-writing campaign to urge the government to release Jang Moon Seok (aka Zhang Wen Shi), an ethnic-Korean Chinese national living in Changbai, China, on the border with North Korea. VOM stated that "Deacon Jang" assisted North Koreans who crossed the border and shared his faith with them. According to VOM, in November 2014, North Korean authorities kidnapped Jang from China, imprisoned him, and sentenced him to 15 years in prison.

In 2019, the HRNK reported the government continued to promote a policy that all citizens, young and old, participate in local defense and be willing to mobilize for national defense purposes. There were neither exceptions for these requirements nor any alternative to military service for conscientious objectors.

*Juche* (“self-reliance”) and *Suryong* (“supreme leader”) remained important ideological underpinnings of the government and the cults of personality of previous leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, as well as current leader Kim Jong Un. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority was regarded as opposition to the national interest and reportedly resulted in severe punishment. Some scholars stated the *Juche* philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resembled a form of state-sponsored theology. Approximately 100,000 *Juche* research centers reportedly existed throughout the country. KINU’s 2019 white paper reported one defector as saying, “North Korea oppresses religion, particularly Christianity, because of the sense that the one-person dictatorship can be undermined by religious faith.”

The 2014 COI report found the government considered Christianity a serious threat that challenged the official cults of personality and provided a platform for social and political organization and interaction outside the government. The report concluded that Christians faced persecution, violence, and heavy punishment if they practiced their religion outside state-controlled churches. The report further recommended the country allow Christians and other religious believers to exercise their religions independently and publicly without fear of punishment, reprisal, or surveillance.

According to NGOs, the government’s policy towards religion was intended to maintain an appearance of tolerance for international audiences while suppressing internally all religious activities not sanctioned by the state. As it had in years past, KINU stated in its 2019 annual white paper on human rights that it was “practically impossible for North Korean people to have a religion in their daily lives.” According to the NKDB, the constitution represented only a nominal freedom granted to political supporters and only when the regime deemed it necessary to use it as a policy tool. A survey of 12,625 refugees between 2007 and March 2018 by the NKDB found 99.6 percent said there was no religious freedom in the country.

According to the NKDB, the South Korean government estimated that as of 2018, there were 121 religious facilities in the DPRK, including 60 Buddhist temples, 52 Chondoist temples, three state-controlled Protestant churches, and one Russian Orthodox church. The 2015 KINU annual white paper counted 60 Buddhist temples and reported most citizens did not realize Buddhist temples were religious facilities and did not regard Buddhist monks as religious figures. The

temples were regarded as cultural heritage sites and tourist destinations. KINU's 2019 annual white paper concluded no religious facilities existed outside of Pyongyang.

In its 2019 report, KINU stated the government continued to use authorized religious organizations for external propaganda and political purposes and reported citizens were strictly barred from entering places of worship. Ordinary citizens considered such places primarily as "sightseeing spots for foreigners." KINU concluded the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated ordinary citizens did not have religious freedom. In its 2020 annual report, the NKDB stated, "Although there are several churches and other religious facilities in North Korea, such as Chilgol and Bongsu Church, as well as Jangchung Cathedral, they are sponsored entirely by the state, and therefore access to the facilities for the sake of genuine religious activity, especially for regular citizens, is heavily restricted." Less than 2.5 percent of 13,958 defectors the NDKB interviewed between 1997 and 2019 said they had visited religious facilities. The 2014 COI report concluded that authorities systematically sought to hide the persecution of Christians who practiced their religion outside state-controlled churches from the international community by pointing to the small number of state-controlled churches as exemplifying religious freedom and pluralism.

The five state-controlled Christian churches in Pyongyang included three Protestant churches (Bongsu, Chilgol, and Jeil Churches), a Catholic church (Changchung Cathedral), and the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Chilgol Church, a state-controlled Protestant church, was dedicated to the memory of former leader Kim Il Sung's mother, Kang Pan Sok, a Presbyterian deaconess. The number of congregants regularly worshiping at these churches was unknown, and there was no information on whether scheduled services were available at these locations. Some defectors who previously lived in or near Pyongyang reported knowing about these churches. In KINU's 2019 report, one defector said that when he lived in Pyongyang, authorities arrested individuals, whom they believed lingered too long outside these churches to listen to the music or consistently drove past them each week when services were being held, on suspicion of being secret Christians. This defector also said authorities quickly realized one unintended consequence of allowing music at the services and permitting persons to attend church was that many attendees converted to Christianity, and therefore authorities took steps to mitigate that outcome. Numerous other defectors from outside Pyongyang reported no knowledge of these churches. According to

KINU, in years past, foreign Christians who visited the country testified they witnessed church doors closed on Easter Sunday, and many foreign visitors said church activities seemed to be staged. In its 2019 dossier on North Korea, ODUSA stated, “The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.”

Foreign legislators who attended services in Pyongyang in previous years reported congregations arrived and departed services as groups on tour buses, and some observed the worshippers did not include any children. Some foreigners noted they were not permitted to have contact with worshippers, and others stated they had limited interaction with them. Foreign observers had limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups but generally assumed the government monitored them closely. KINU’s 2019 white paper described the example of Bongsu Protestant Church in Pyongyang, which was built in September 1988. Defectors reported that only the building guard and the guard’s family lived there, but when foreign guests came to visit, several hundred citizens between the ages of 40 and 50 were carefully selected and gathered to participate in fake church services.

In its 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” According to the 2019 KINU report, not one defector who testified for the report was aware of the existence of such “family churches.” According to a survey of 12,810 defectors cited in the 2018 NKDB report, none saw any of these purported home churches, and only 1.3 percent of respondents believed they existed. Observers stated “family worship centers” could be part of the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation (KCF).

The 2018 NKDB report noted the existence of state-sanctioned religious organizations in the country, such as the KCF, Korea Buddhist Union, Korean Catholic Council, Korea Chondoist Church Central Committee, Korea Orthodox Church Committee, and Korean Council of Religionists. There was minimal information available on the activities of such organizations, except for some information on inter-Korean religious exchanges in 2015.

The government-established Korean Catholic Council continued to hold masses at the Changchung Cathedral, but the Holy See continued not to recognize it as a Roman Catholic church. There were no Vatican-recognized Catholic priests, monks, or nuns residing in the country.

According to foreign religious leaders who traveled to the country in previous years, there were Protestant pastors at Bongsu and Chilgol Churches, although it was not known if they were citizens or visiting pastors.

Five Russian Orthodox priests served at the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country. The clergy included North Koreans, several of whom had reportedly studied at the Russian Orthodox seminary in Moscow.

In 2019, United Press International cited a report by the state-run media outlet Ryomyong describing an Easter Sunday Mass at Pyongyang's Changchung Cathedral. According to Ryomyong, citizens and foreign worshippers attended.

The NKDB stated officials conducted thorough searches of incoming packages and belongings at ports, customs checkpoints, and airports to search for religious items as well as other items the government deemed objectionable. ODUSA reported some individuals brought audio devices containing the Bible and other religious materials from China or smuggled in radios for local residents to listen to Christian broadcasts from overseas.

According to KFI, beginning in kindergarten, children were taught antireligious views, with a particular focus on Christianity. The report stated, "While Buddhism and Cheondogyo were explained as matters of historical interest, rather than as religions, it was Christianity that was singled out for attention within the public-school system. Multiple respondents spoke of textbooks containing sections on Christian missionaries that listed their "evil deeds," which included rape, blood sucking, organ harvesting, murder, and espionage."

In June, the government demolished the inter-Korean liaison office, a building in the city of Kaesong near the border with South Korea. Media reported that the demolition occurred in retaliation after defector groups in South Korea sent anti-DPRK government leaflets and other materials over the border. Christian media reported that items sent over the border also often contained Christian materials, including tracts and testimonies written by North Korean Christian refugees, physical Bibles, and digital copies of the Bible on flash drives. Kim Yo Jong, then first deputy director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department and the sister of Kim Jong Un, denounced those who sent the material as "betrayers" and "human scum."

According to KINU, religion continued to be used to justify restricting individuals to the lowest class rungs of the *songbun* system, which classifies persons on the basis of social class, family background, and presumed support of the regime. The *songbun* classification system resulted in discrimination in education, health care, employment opportunities, and residence. KINU continued to report that religious persons and their families were perceived to be “antirevolutionary elements.”

According to KINU’s 2019 report, the government continued to view religion as a means of foreign encroachment. In the report, KINU quoted the North Korean Academy of Social Science Philosophy Institute’s *Dictionary on Philosophy* as stating, “Religion is historically seized by the ruling class to deceive the masses and was used as a means to exploit and oppress, and it has recently been used by the imperialists as an ideological tool to invade underdeveloped countries.” KINU reported citizens continued to receive education from authorities at least twice a year that emphasized ways to detect individuals who engaged in spreading Christianity.

The government reportedly continued to be concerned that faith-based South Korean relief and refugee assistance efforts along the northeast border with China had both humanitarian and political goals, including the overthrow of the government, and to allege that these groups were involved in intelligence gathering. The government reportedly maintained tight border controls that became even stricter in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19, hindering relief and assistance activities.

In 2019, the *Asia Times* reported that South Korean-based Christian charities said the government sometimes declined aid for political reasons and that in some cases, the charities distributed the aid in secret through underground Christian networks.

In December, the UN General Assembly passed by consensus a resolution, cosponsored by the United States, that condemned “in the strongest terms the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights in and by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, including those that may amount to crimes against humanity.” The General Assembly expressed its very serious concern at “the imposition of the death penalty for political and religious reasons,” and “all-pervasive and severe restrictions, both online and offline, on the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion or belief, opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association[.]” The UN General Assembly also strongly urged the government “to respect fully all human rights and fundamental freedoms[.]” The annual resolution again welcomed the

Security Council's continued consideration of the COI's relevant conclusion and recommendations.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Due to the country's inaccessibility, little was known about the day-to-day life of individuals practicing a religion. Travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated this inaccessibility.

The 2014 COI report concluded government messaging regarding the purported evils of Christianity led to negative views of Christianity among ordinary citizens.

Defector accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to fear they would be reported to authorities. According to the ODUSA dossier, due to the constant indoctrination permeating the country, Christians were seen as hostile elements in society, and family members and neighbors were expected to report suspicious activities to the authorities, including through the network of neighborhood informers. For this reason, "many parents prefer not to tell their children anything about their Christian faith."

In 2019, the *South China Morning Post* reported that a defector described her family quietly singing Christian hymns on Sundays while one person watched for informers. Another described hiding under a blanket or in the bathroom while praying. ODUSA reported that many Bibles, devotionals, Christian books, and songbooks to which individuals had access dated from the 1920s through the end of World War II. These were kept hidden and passed among believers. One man said persons remained careful even within their own families when teaching Christian beliefs for fear of being reported. According to the NGO, "Meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible, and if some believers dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy." In 2019, KINU again reported accounts of private Christian religious activity in the country, although the existence of underground churches and the scope of underground religious activity remained difficult to quantify. While some NGOs and academics estimated that up to several hundred thousand Christians practiced their faith in secret, others questioned the existence of a large-scale underground church or concluded it was impossible to estimate accurately the number

of underground religious believers. Individual underground congregations were reportedly very small and typically confined to private homes. In the “government training” video released by VOM in September 2019, the narrator claimed Cha Deoksun and other believers met in the woods. Some defectors and NGOs said unapproved religious materials were available and that secret religious meetings occurred, spurred by cross-border contact with individuals and groups in China. According to *The Christian Post*, the NKDB stated in its annual white paper published in October that since 2000, as many as 559 defectors said they had “seen a Bible.” NKDB stated that of the 14,091 individuals who defected between 1997 and 2019, only 167 (1.2 percent) said that they had personally experienced practicing religion in secret. Only 677 (5 percent) of 13,557 individuals had witnessed others practicing in secret.

While COVID-19 restrictions prevented individuals from attending weddings and funerals, KINU reported that in prior years, religious ceremonies accompanying these events were almost unknown. Other sources, however, indicated there were still shamanistic elements in weddings and funerals.

According to KFI, the government intensified its campaign against shamanism during the year. The government hung posters and issued directives warning citizens against engaging in “superstitious acts.” These directives were posted in apartment blocks. NGOs noted, however, an apparent continued increase in shamanistic practices, including in Pyongyang. KFI stated that shamanism was illicitly practiced by both ordinary citizens and officials. Investigators documented many persons engaging both publicly and privately in shamanistic practices, including traditional rituals, fortune telling, physiognomy, exorcism, the use of talismans, the use of the Christian Bible, the use of birth charts, and tarot cards. One source told RFA it was common for individuals to consult fortune tellers before planning weddings, making business deals, handling health matters, or considering other important decisions. One source told *Asia Press* that government officials also consulted fortune tellers about their health and careers. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of shamanism. According to the source, however, fortune tellers who faced punishment were those “who [made] a lot of wrong predictions” and therefore did not receive the protection of officials. The source said, “The good fortune tellers are paid by officials and therefore do not get caught.” One defector who escaped in 2019 told KFI investigators, “People who practice shamanism will be sentenced to a maximum of five years in a re-education camp if the penalty is harsh. They used to



be sentenced to a labor training camp for three or six months, but the sentence has been made stricter.”

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK and has no official presence in the country.

The United States cosponsored the resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in December that condemned the country’s “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights,” and it expressed very serious concern about abuses, including imposition of the death penalty for religious reasons and restrictions on the freedoms of conscience, religion, or belief.

The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country. This included an October meeting of like-minded countries to coordinate actions and discuss the DPRK’s human rights record. The United States made clear that addressing human rights, including religious freedom, would significantly improve prospects for closer ties between the two countries. Senior U.S. government officials met with defectors and NGOs that focused on the country.

In a speech delivered in September at the Vatican, the Secretary of State urged Christian leaders to support religious freedom and speak up for persecuted Christians, including those in the DPRK. On October 27, on the occasion of International Religious Freedom Day, the Secretary stated North Korea was one of the world’s “most egregious religious freedom abusers.”

Since 2001, the DPRK has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 2, 2020, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions to which North Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

